Baroque Practice

The Pulse of Baroque Music

by Ginna Watson

When we teach a new piece to our students, do we start with the notes or the rhythms?

I would guess that most of us start with the notes, only secondarily linking them with their rhythmic values as we—and our students—go about learning them. And the underlying pulse of the piece—the major division of the time signature—may receive only a mention at the beginning of the learning process.

This note-centered style of learning may work for romantic-era music, although it's debatable even there, but it's definitely putting the cart before the horse when it comes to baroque music. For the pulse, or tactus, rules in the baroque; it's the organizing principle that the melodic and harmonic elements fit into. It also provides the feeling of steady movement that's so enjoyable to listen, play, drive or cook to. (Or even golf to—I know a minister who claims that playing a recording of the *Brandenburg Concertos* on the course has helped lower his handicap considerably.)

There's a reason for this steady pulse of course—baroque music largely consists of or is derived from dance music. And because it's dance music, it has a physicality that's an essential part of its character. That, I think, is the real allure of the baroque style—the physical pull it has on our bodies so that we can feel the music, not just listen to it.

Yet we often play down this physicality when teaching or performing baroque music, either because we're focused on the notes or because we think that emphasizing the beat as the central element of the music isn't interesting or "advanced" enough.

During a recent masterclass that I gave for a high school string orchestra, the students expressed dissatisfaction with playing the *Capriol Suite* by Peter Warlock, which is based on a collection of Renaissance dance tunes. They said it was too easy, boring to play and not as much fun as the Mendelssohn *Reformation Symphony* they had just played, which had a lot of "really fast notes" going into high positions and which they perceived as being more advanced.

We talked a little about why the notes in Renaissance and baroque music are often simpler than in later music: since the string players at that time used no chinrests or shoulder rests and no endpins, they played the dance-based tunes primarily in first position, where they could use their bodies' natural gravity to feel a solid beat with their bows. They could also move to the music, since they didn't have to hold their instruments in the same position at all times. The students then played a couple of the movements from the *Capriol Suite* in Renaissance position, with their fiddles down on their arms and their cellos and basses held with their legs and perched on stools. I asked them to emphasize the main beats or pulse of the music, and to feel that pulse together with the other players.

That was the real fun of playing baroque and Renaissance music, we decided—playing it like dance music by feeling the beat in our bodies, with the occasional challenge of playing cross-rhythms and hemiolas against other voices in the orchestra. Played in this way, baroque music is similar to traditional folk or world music—genres that also originated as dance music.

More and more elementary school music programs are introducing rhythm from the beginning as an integral part of teaching music, using whole-body movement and rhythm games that can be found in the Dalcroze Eurhythmics method. But too often ensemble directors in middle school, high school, and college don't continue this emphasis on basic beat and rhythm, concentrating instead on the micro-level of notes and individual rhythmic values without first giving the students an underlying pulse to fit the notes and rhythms into.

It's easy to skip this basic step—after all, there are so many notes to learn! Unfortunately, it ends up making for a slippery surface for the students to play on, and in the case of baroque and Renaissance music, it leaves out the part of the music that's the most fun.

The Suzuki Series contains many wonderful baroque pieces, but it too falls into the trap of thinking that because the notes are relatively easy, the music isn't advanced enough for intermediate-level students. So to try to make the music more challenging, the editors have put in fingerings that have the student shift often into higher positions. While teaching shifting technique through solos is a worthy practice, many of the baroque pieces were written to be played largely in first position, and are somewhat awkward and certainly less natural to play in higher positions. As a result, students end up obscuring the pulse of the pieces while they're focusing on shifts and intonation.

One way for both orchestra directors and private teachers to help students maintain the pulse of intermediate- and advanced-level baroque music is to have them play it all initially in first position, taking higher notes down an octave. Then, after they're able to feel the basic beat and subdivide the rhythmic note values, they can add in the shifts and higher positions.

Of course, an even better way to have students learn the pulse of a piece is to have them clap, tap, or march to it from the very beginning, before even learning the notes! But are we brave enough to do that? It does take extra time, which we don't have enough of already; but I think the end result is worth it.

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